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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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-* SAFE Legislation Gets Passed *-
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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"~~~~~"

"Saying it like it is!"

Well, I don't know whether or not it's carpal tunnel or arthritis, but I do know that my wrists are really sore after a bout of another snowstorm yesterday! We got hit with over 8 inches in my neighborhood, and the storm hung around most of the day. I've been out three times already to clean it all up, with another round likely to do a little more. Why? Because the prediction is for another Nor'easter to hit us over the weekend! Fortunately, we have a snow blower, so I don't have to shovel the majority of what we get. Otherwise, I'd likely need to spend a day or more in a hot sauna soothing these aching old bones!

So, it's getting mighty close to the holiday - only another week or so to go. The bulk of our shopping is done, with a few last-minute items to get over the weekend. Glad to have this all under control, and done early for a change! I hope you're all doing as well, and will have some time to relax before the big day.

I have some additional comments to make this week, but since they pertain to Joe's column this week, I'll add them at the end of his column rather than spoil it all before you get there!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. Well, you probably noticed that there was no People Are Talking column last week.

Or... maybe you didn't. I don't know. Although I get a few emails every so-often, it's usually when I've touched a nerve, ticked someone off or made a point that you hadn't thought of before. And that's okay with me. I also make sure that, if you send me an email, you get one back, just so you know that I actually ready yours.

There just weren't enough messages in the Newsgroup last week to justify a column, so I saved 'em up to add to this week's messages. Let's see if we can make a go of it this time.

Last week I had a good start on my column intro, too. It dealt with one of my pet peeves: Inaccurate grammar.

I was reading an article on an astronomy-related website last week about the estimated age of a cluster of stars. It turns out that these stars aren't anywhere near as old as we thought they were.

This is the kind of stuff I enjoy reading. It's what keeps my mind from turning completely to oatmeal. Well, a paragraph or two into the article, the author writes that the stars are "ten times younger" than previously thought.

Now that really ticks me off. Here's an article on a science-based website, talking about astronomy... a real, honest-to-goodness science... and we're talking about "ten times younger"??

You may know what the author is talking about, but the phrase is inaccurate and, therefore, of very little use for scientific discussion. So I wrote him an email, and pointed out that the phrase was not only scientifically inaccurate but grammatically incorrect.

In case you're scratching your head trying to figure out what my problem is with this phrase, I'll fill you in: There is no such thing as ten times younger. Something can be one tenth as old, but not ten times younger. That's like an item on sale costing "more less".

Nitpicking, you say? Perhaps. But it's sloppy grammar and, therefore, sloppy thought. It's like those finance company commercials that used to tell us that we could "save up to ten percent or more".

There's another commercial circulating right now (for AT&T, if I remember correctly) where a woman says that she'd use the money she saved to buy "some really awesome concert tickets". Ummm... which is awesome? The concert, or the tickets? As stated, it would be the tickets themselves that would be awesome... I don't know... maybe they'd have glitter on them or they'd glow in the dark or something. Wouldn't "some tickets to a really awesome concert" be what she really meant?

Another commercial talks about the tradition of breaking a wishbone. We all know that one, right? One person pulls on one side of the wishbone, and another person pulls on the other, until it breaks. Well in the commercial, they explain that the person who gets "the bigger half" will have their wish come true.

Ummm... excuse me... BIGGER half? Point that copy writer to a dictionary, please. By definition, halves are equal. There is no such thing as a 'bigger' half.

Of course, there are many examples of things like this... the phrase "same difference" comes to mind... and most people will argue that, as long as you know what someone means, it's okay.

Well it's not okay. You cannot mean what you say if you cannot say what you mean. The author of that article didn't mean that the stars in question were ten times younger... he couldn't have, since there's no

such thing.... he meant that they are one tenth as old. The person who gets the bigger PIECE of the wishbone will get their wish, and I think we'd all much rather enjoy an awesome concert as opposed to an awesome ticket.

Anyway, I don't know if he's too busy to answer emails, if he thought I was nitpicking, or if he just didn't take it seriously, but the author of that astronomy article never replied. So I guess we can add 'rude' to his list of transgressions, huh?

You have no way of knowing this, but I've been sitting here for about ten minutes now, trying to think of a witty zinger to close with. Unfortunately, it's always easier to point out someone else's mistakes and shortcomings than to do something original and witty. Or perhaps I really am just nit-picking and am part of the burgeoning idiocracy that I commonly rant about.

Irregardless, let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from that UseNet thing.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Alan Hourihane asks about the NVRAM clock chip in his Falcon030:

"O.k. so my Falcon's clock chip has died and it was the MK48T87B-24 variant.

I've heard that the DS1287 works as a replacement or you can hack at the chip to expose the pins. Unfortunately mine was the hard top version and it broken away.

So I'm looking for a replacement device with a 24 pin socket.

Anyone ordered from somewhere before, preferably in the UK, but I'm quite happy if it's somewhere else.

I have googled, but I want to make sure it's the right device. Thanks for any advice!"

Edward Baiz tells Alan:

"Yeah mine has died also. I am waiting for my CT-63 upgrade from Czuba Tech. That will have a 90mhz non programmable clock chip on it. I read where a guy actually hooked up a battery to his dead clock chip and it worked fine. I guess you have to dig in the top of the chip, pull out some contacts and connect the battery."

Greg Goodwin adds:

"I did that about a year ago. Works fine, and you just need a dremel and a bit of patience. Also, it's a fairly idiot proof task -- about the worst you can do is to ruin the chip, and you were planning on replacing it anyways!"

Edward replies:

"I have a dremel tool, so maybe I will give it a try some day..."

Alan Hourihane asks for help in troubleshooting something that 'blowed up' on his motherboard:

"O.k, so I've got an eiffel hooked up to my Falcon, and something has shorted and popped something on the falcon mainboard. I'm not sure what to look for, any ideas anyone?"

'Shadow' tells Alan:

"Capacitors pop. Smell may be good tool in this case. Besides looking for toasty bits."

Mike Freeman adds:

"I also have had a transistor pop on me. I had installed a PC power supply onto my stock Falcon after the original went out. Someone told me that the colors for the wires should be the same, so I went with that. Bad mistake. I connected the wires, powered it up (with the top of the case off in case I had to make any other changes), and I heard a loud pop, saw a puff of smoke, and heard half of the transistor hit the wall on the opposite side of the room! Very exciting! Fortunately, the transistor, which was part of the audio system, was easy to replace, and after doing that and connecting the power supply the correct way, everything worked perfectly again."

Joakim H^ 'lgberg adds:

"What version of the Eiffel do you have? I have one that Satantronic made, the version that fits in a slot on a PC tower case. In my case, the Eiffel was short circuited when put in a metal case, the shielding of the joystick port carried some voltage.

I had a look on the PCB layout and found out where it came from, and now it seems ok. But do check things out carefully with a multimeter before trying to hook it up to the Falcon again!

Check this out:

<http://tinyurl.com/2ht3yp> [URL modified by Editor]"

'Skweekyfeet' asks for help in wiring a null-modem interface:

"I really do fancy running the Geoff Crammond classic Stunt Car Racer again. To that end is there anyone here able to tell me how to wire a null modem cable for that all important link for 2 ST's. I have a 5 core cable (that used to work fine) with 1 end still on and wired....the other end was cut by the builders when we had some work done about 15 years ago. I believe 2 wires had to be reversed but which ones? On this 25 way d plug I have 2,3,4,5 and 7 wired. Your help will be much appreciated."

'Shadow' tells Skweek:

"Google and Wikipedia are your friend.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Null_modem "

Dave Wade tells Shadow:

"Isn't this a complex article. You need to cross 4 wires. 2-3/3-2 and 4-5/5-4 and 7-7 is uncrossed."

Shadow tells Dave that he....

"Didn't actually read it. Do recall thinking the diagram seemed busy. Point was it's very easy to type "null modem" into a search engine. Get lots of info someone has already produced."

Dave points out:

"Not when its wrong. e.g. here:-
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethernet_crossover_cable

it says you can make a token ring cross over cable. You can't....."

Shadow asks Dave:

"Assuming your are correct, and I have no desire to find out if you are, are you saying no one should ever use Wikipedia because you found an error?

I normally get more than one source for things that might let the smoke out of my components. The internet like most other things requires a little common sense. I wouldn't believe one person's posting in a newsgroup either. Google is a search engine."

Jason Harmon takes an interest and asks about the token ring cables:

"I found a number of references for Token Ring crossover cables online, including some cable stores with them available. I used 16Mbit token ring years ago, but never heard of direct connections between machines. Are these cables maybe for use in connecting hubs/rings/routers (whatever the correct device name is for TR) instead of PCs?"

Shadow replies:

"My knowledge of Token Ring is basic from a text book and that memory is fading. I Was kind of wondering why you'd even need a crossover cable for it but not enough to research it. Chances I'll ever see a Token Ring let alone work on one is almost nil. Not too lazy to read what you 2 post though."

For the past several columns, we've been watching a thread on the

December 10th Computer Museum shindig at which Jack Tramiel was slated to speak. Let's take a look at the latest information provided by Robert Bernardo:

"CNET News has posted a report of the event.

Go to:

http://www.news.com/8301-13772_3-9832182-52.html?tag=nefd.top

From: Cameron Kaiser

Anyway, here are some photos. This is Jack at the press reception:

<http://www.floodgap.com/temp/qDSCN0785.jpg>

Jack and his wife, talking to Bil Herd:

<http://www.floodgap.com/temp/qDSCN0795.jpg>

The cake Liquid Computing brought along:

<http://www.floodgap.com/temp/qDSCN0796.jpg>

Bill Ward and I splitting the last piece:

<http://www.floodgap.com/temp/qDSCN0800.jpg>

And last but not least, yours truly with Leonard and Jack:

<http://www.floodgap.com/temp/qDSCN0789.jpg> "

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

[Publisher's note: It's very rare that I find something in Joe's column that gets a rise out of me. Reading Joe's comments about the "common" use of poor grammar (and spelling) rings quite true. Such poor writing drives me crazy - it occurs in so many venues, including newspapers and television. I'm talking about professionals, people who we rely on for accurate reporting, etc. If we can't depend on them to spell correctly and use proper grammar, where can we turn?

So, after reading Joe's comments, I started to get worked up about it because I was agreeing with Joe with every word, until the end of his commentary! And there it was: "irregardless"! My mouth dropped. I didn't get a phone call from Joe, so I'm guessing that his ears weren't ringing! He used one of those "words" that is probably one of my all-time pet peeves. After all of his commentary, he used "that word".

But, I decided that I had better play it safe before I wrote anything. After all, we're friends and co-conspirators with this weekly missive. So, I decided to research things so I could point out some facts; I went to my old Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary to check it out. I was prepared to point out to Joe that there was no such entry. Lo and behold, there was an entry for it! Technically, Joe is correct, but take a look at the definition as Webster's points out:

irregardless: adv. [prob. blend of irrespective and regardless]

Usage: Irregardless originated in dialectal American speech in the early 20th century. Its fairly widespread use in speech called it to the

attention of usage commentators as early as 1927. The most frequently repeated remark about it is that "there is no such word." There is such a word, however. It is still used primarily in speech, although it can be found from time to time in edited prose. Its reputation has not risen over the years, and it is still a long way from general acceptance. Use regardless instead.

So, I saved myself (and Joe!) some unnecessary needling. I agree with the dictionary's "suggestion" to avoid the word, and use the word regardless instead. But, since the word exists, I'll now have to become more tolerant of its usage!]

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->In This Week's Gaming Section   - Wii "Rain Checks" Guaranteed!
    " " " " " " " " " " " " " "   PlayStation 'Eye' Released!
                                     Politicians Skewered!
                                     And much more!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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The Long-Awaited PlayStation Eye

The idea of watching a video game is not new. But what about when the games start watching back? Last week, Sony released its long-awaited PlayStation Eye, a digital camera that lets players interact with some games using body motions.

The PlayStation Eye is Sony's answer to Live Vision, Microsoft's camera for its Xbox 360 game console. The Eye, for the PlayStation 3, has twice the resolution of its predecessor, the EyeToy.

The PlayStation Eye, which could just as easily have been named for the ear, comes with four tiny omnidirectional microphones that pick up spoken words even in a noisy room.

Software titles that can be used with the camera include SingStar, a karaoke-style game that lets you create and share your own music videos; Eye of Judgment, an interactive card game in which creatures jump out of printed cards; and Aquatopia, which turns your display into an interactive fish tank.

If you've ever looked at a digital camera full of photos and thought, "Those pictures aren't going to upload themselves," you can think again. Eye-Fi has created a memory card with a built-in Wi-Fi transmitter that will automatically upload your photos to any of 17 photo sites when you

are within range of a designated wireless network.

The 2-gigabyte SD memory card looks like any other, but it has a small antenna and Wi-Fi service inside. To set it up, the card has to be in the supplied card reader and formatted to recognize the right network.

If you use a photo-sharing site like Shutterfly, Flickr or Facebook, the card will send photos over the Internet to Eye-Fi, which then formats them for the site you use. It also automates sign-in and passwords so that your photos seem to magically appear.

The Eye-Fi card and reader is available online from Amazon, Buy.com and Wal-Mart.

It can also be set up to send photos directly to your computer, if you want to be selective about what gets shared.

Nintendo, GameStop To Guarantee Wiis After Holiday

Nintendo Co Ltd said on Friday it will offer a "rain check" program to deliver the Wii in January to shoppers who can't buy the game console during the holiday season due to inventory shortages.

Nintendo of America President Reggie Fils-Aime told a telephone news conference that shoppers who pay the full price of about \$249 for an out-of-stock Wii on December 20 and 21 at retailer GameStop Corp will get a certificate promising a Wii "sometime in January."

The program is exclusive to GameStop. The executive declined to say how many units would be available, but noted that the video game specialty retailer had "many tens of thousands" of rain checks.

"We expect this to be a very strong program and ... a great way for consumers who desperately want a Wii to be able to have something to put under the tree - a certificate that guarantees their family will be able to get a system in January," he said.

Fils-Aime also said several national U.S. retailers, including Best Buy Co Inc, Sears Holdings Corp and Wal-Mart Stores Inc, will have Wiis available this weekend and in the coming week.

The Wii has been in hot demand due largely to its unique motion-sensing controller and simpler games that have drawn customers outside the traditional base of young males. Nintendo remained on top of the U.S. game hardware in November, selling 981,000 Wiis, according to market research firm NPD.

While sales of rival consoles - Microsoft Corp's Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 by Sony Corp - have been strong, consumers across the United States have scrambled to find a Wii, often lining up before dawn at shops, or paying significantly marked-up prices.

Fils-Aime said that because of strong demand for the Wii, which has sold 6 million units since it launched in the U.S. about one year ago, Nintendo has not been able to manufacture the systems fast enough to satisfy consumers' appetites.

"There was no ability for us to stockpile systems over the summer to meet the holiday rush," he said. "The appeal ... to nongamers has taken away some of the seasonality of sales we have come to expect in the past."

Fils-Aime, who called the shortages "unfortunate," added that Nintendo has raised production twice in the past year to about 1.8 million units a month from an initial run of 1 million a month.

"We will continue producing at that level for quite a while," he said. "This shortfall benefits no one. Enough systems would make everyone, including me, much happier."

PC Game Skewers Politicians Evenhandedly

If you're tired of watching Mitt and Mike, Hilary and Rudy, and Colbert and Coulter limit their swipes to words, pick one and go for it in the new video game "DC Smackdown."

Featuring signature moves like the "Intern Trample," "Mormon Conversion" and "Barack Your World," the 17-character game skewers bipartisanly. A pantsless Bill Clinton chases a herd of Monica Lewinskys, Jesse Jackson hurls Hasidic Jews and Anne Coulter has a special "verbal diarrhea" attack.

"It's a real simple game - we're talking Street Fighter, circa 1994," said Dave Holbrook, a freelance producer and former Disney animator who made it, with help from friends, in his spare time. "It's nothing crazy, but it's a fun little commentary on what's going on. And everybody's special move has to do with their political stance or what they've said."

Now available just for PCs, the game costs \$4.99 to download. Holbrook said he initially wanted to charge an extra buck for donation to the customer's political campaign of choice, but changed his mind because of regulatory paperwork.

If it sells, Holbrook wants to expand to the Xbox or Wii and include historic politicians and pundits.

Holbrook said he and the other creators tried hard to poke evenhanded fun on a cast narrowed from 30 choices.

"Glen Beck started becoming more popular, so we switched him with Sean Hannity," he said. "We almost had Stephen Colbert in there, but we chose (Jon) Stewart. (Colbert) is in the game, though - he's actually Jon Stewart's attack. He throws Stephen Colbert."

The game has eight levels - the first six randomly generated from the list of characters and the last two involving combat between former Vice President Al Gore and President George W. Bush.

Bush's special attack is "nuclear" - with his signature pronunciation - while Gore's is global warming. Gore has a "CO2 fart attack," while Bush has a Karl Rove attack. Dressed like the grim reaper, Rove passes through and steals the opponent's soul.

NY School Opens Lab for Serious Games

A new research lab at the prestigious Parsons design school aims to develop video games with a conscience - called "serious games" - and study whether playing them can be a force for social good.

The games, which aim to educate, appeal mostly to a niche market and are used to train public officials, students and professionals in various fields.

The U.S. military, for example, trains with games that model terrorist attacks, school hostage crises and natural disasters. Other serious games teach nonviolent ways of fighting dictators and military occupiers.

Director Colleen Macklin hopes research at Parsons The New School of Design's PETLab, launched Wednesday and made up of students and faculty, will make serious games more mainstream.

"Our goal is really to create intersections between game design, social issues and learning," she said.

PETLab, in the first such effort in the country, will create models of new types of games or interactive designs that address social issues and will do interactive research on whether playing the games helps effect positive social change.

It is funded by a \$450,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation as part of the foundation's study of how digital technologies are changing the way people learn and socialize.

Lab researchers hope to create more games like the popular "Ayiti: The Cost of Life," developed by the nonprofit Global Kids and tech company GameLab, in which players manage life for a virtual family of five in rural Haiti. The object of the game is to make spending decisions - saving money vs. throwing a party vs. buying food - that keep the family healthy.

PETLab has partnered with Games for Change, a nonprofit group that supports serious game designers and provides a forum for designers to show off their work.

"We're planting seeds for the next generation of game makers," said Suzanne Seggerman, founder of Games for Change. "How amazing would it be to have 'Fast Food Nation' or 'An Inconvenient Truth' as a video game, where players can actually learn how to make their environment better through the game?"

So far, the lab is working with Microsoft Corp., studying whether the software maker's Xbox game development tool could be modified to create socially conscious games.

The lab also is working with the social arm of MTV's Web site, think.MTV.com, which offers information on the environment, sexual health and immigration. And it is designing tutorials on creating games for young people.

Violent Game 'Manhunt 2' Wins Appeal Against British Ban

A violent video game featuring blood-spattered scenes in an asylum is set for release in Britain after its makers won an appeal against censors on Monday.

"Manhunt 2" was twice rejected by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) this year, becoming the first video game in a decade to be banned in Britain.

Censors said it demonstrated "casual sadism" and an "unrelenting focus on stalking and brutal slaying".

But its makers Rockstar Games, famous for producing the acclaimed "Grand Theft Auto" series, were successful in an appeal to the Video Appeals Committee which overturned the BBFC's decision.

The reasons for the ruling will be published in the next few days.

Rockstar said it was pleased with the decision and added it was committed to marketing its products "responsibly".

"Manhunt 2", which is made for the Playstation2 and Nintendo Wii consoles, was the first video game in a decade to be refused a classification by the British censors.

Stills on the "Manhunt 2" website show computer-graphic images of blood-drenched people attacking each other with syringes, axes and knives amid scenes of decapitations and mutilations.

It has had a troubled launch, with its makers suspending its planned July launch in the United States and Europe after it fell foul of the censors in Britain, Ireland, Italy and Switzerland.

The game eventually went on sale in the US market in October this year.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

House Tries to Make the Internet SAFE

By an overwhelming margin - 409 to 2 - the U.S. House of Representatives passed new legislation on Thursday aimed at making the Internet safer for children. The Securing Adolescents From Exploitation-Online (SAFE) Act was sponsored by Texas Democrat Nick Lampson, one of the founding members of the House Missing and Exploited Children's Caucus.

Among other things, the legislation imposes significant fines on Internet service providers (ISPs) that fail to report evidence of child

exploitation to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. According to a press release from Rep. Lampson's office, ISPs would be fined \$150,000 per incident per day for first offenses, and \$300,000 per incident per day for second and succeeding offenses.

"We are not trying to make these (Internet providers) spies on what they put out there," Lampson said in the statement, "but there are plenty of ways information can be gleaned from what you see on the Internet and if that is illegal, we want it reported to law enforcement."

According to an analysis by CNET's Declan McCullough, the bill's definition of ISP - anyone offering an open Wi-Fi service - could apply to municipalities, libraries, coffee shops, or even individuals who fail to password protect their Wi-Fi router. The language of the legislation, which was adopted without congressional hearings or significant debate, may also apply to social-networking sites, e-mail service providers, and Internet search engines.

Lauren Weinstein, the cofounder of People for Internet Responsibility, said that he is not particularly concerned that federal agents will be targeting coffee shops and homeowners. "I don't think that's where the likely focus of enforcement will be," Weinstein said in a phone interview.

Instead, Weinstein argued, law enforcement is much more likely to target services that either store infringing images or display them as part of search results. "It seems very likely to me," he said, "that groups concerned about the issue of child pornography and feeling empowered by the SAFE Act could argue that a search engine like Google Images has an obligation to comply with the requirements of the law."

The requirements of the legislation, if it takes effect, could impose significant regulatory burdens on affected sites. In addition to reporting possible violations to NCMEC, ISPs and covered sites would be required to preserve the images themselves (normally itself a violation of federal law), as well as preserving information about when the images were accessed and any available information about the individual who downloaded them.

As it is currently drafted, the legislation applies not merely to photographs of minors engaged in sexual activity (which is clearly child pornography), but also more subjective material, including photographs of minors in provocative poses and sexually explicit cartoon drawings depicting minors. Many question whether ISPs should be put in the uncomfortable position of determining whether borderline material should be reported, much of which may not even be criminal.

"This legislation creates potentially huge compliance problems for legitimate sites," Weinstein said. "There are some bright lines that need to be drawn between material that shows real abuse, and material that is only a problem for a few people. More importantly, the farther that you get from real photographs involving minors, the closer you get to trying to police thought crimes."

Virtual Congressman Speaks At Summit

Rep. Edward Markey couldn't make it to Bali for the United Nations

climate change summit, so he sent along the next best thing: an animated version of himself.

Relying on computer technology, Markey, D-Mass., addressed the global climate change meeting Tuesday night using a virtual likeness of himself, known as an "avatar."

Markey's 3-D computerized likeness wore a dark blue suit, a green tie and a white shirt. He used the online community Second Life to speak in front of a computerized image of the Bali conference setting.

"I have teleported here over the Internet," he told the audience.

Markey wanted to attend the Bali conference, but he is involved in talks on the energy bill in Congress this week.

"I had to stay here in Washington to pass a clean energy bill that will make a down payment on the global warming cuts needed to save the planet," Markey said in a statement before his virtual appearance. "But it was critical to show the leaders gathered in Bali that they have partners here in America who are deeply concerned about solving global warming and re-engaging the United States on the global stage."

Markey spoke in front of a computer at a staffer's home on Capitol Hill audiences in Bali and on the Internet viewed his avatar.

"This is my first foray into Second Life, but it won't be my last," he said.

Markey is chairman of the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming. He is also chairman of the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet.

Sun Will Support OpenOffice.org

Sun Microsystems on Monday plans to announce that it will provide support for the OpenOffice.org productivity software suite, citing a wave of momentum behind the open-source project.

The support, which starts at US\$20 per user per year, will be offered to companies that distribute OpenOffice.org, not directly to end-users, according to Mark Herring, senior director of marketing for StarOffice/OpenOffice.org and Network.com. "For a lot of distributors, they wanted to distribute OpenOffice.org and had no option for back-line support," he said.

OpenOffice.org and StarOffice, Sun's accompanying commercial product, are compatible with Microsoft Office and identical in terms of capabilities, which include word processing, spreadsheets and presentation software. But until now, Sun only supported StarOffice.

Another difference will remain - Sun does not plan to provide indemnification against lawsuits for OpenOffice.org, as it does for StarOffice, Herring said.

Sun's move comes as OpenOffice.org is being downloaded 1 million times per week, with total downloads to date standing at about 110 million, Herring

said.

Out of that number, Sun estimates that "tens of millions" of people are actively using the software, according to Herring. The most recent version is 2.3. Version 2.4 is expected in March and will contain significant new features, according to the openoffice.org Web site.

"Microsoft Office is still the dominant tool out there - only a fool would deny that," he said. "But [OpenOffice.org] has had a huge amount of momentum."

Sun believes the average OpenOffice.org user skews younger on average, and that download activity in Europe and the U.S. has been greater than in Asian countries, he added.

Developers can create extensions to the core OpenOffice.org suite. Sun has made a new one for shaving down the size of presentation files, Herring said. The wizard-like tool goes through a file and asks users whether they want to keep or compress the various elements, he said.

Sun plans to provide support for any extensions it creates, according to Herring. As for ones made by third parties, "we would have to work with them on that code on a case-by-case basis," he said.

Sun is also releasing StarOffice 8 Server. Herring described it as a conversion engine that changes 40 document types into PDF files. The server, which costs \$11,000, is aimed at enterprises with large stores of legacy documents that aren't archived with an open standard, according to Herring.

Death Knell Sounds for Wikipedia, About.com

In relatively quiet fashion, search engine giant Google announced the testing of a new tool for organizing and disseminating knowledge on the Web. The new tool is built around the concept of a "knol," which the company says stands for "a unit of knowledge."

"A knol on a particular topic," wrote Udi Manber, Google's vice president of engineering, "is meant to be the first thing someone who searches for this topic for the first time will want to read."

Manber said that, unlike Wikipedia, which relies on the collective and relatively anonymous contributions of many different editors, Google's knols will be primarily written by a single, identified author whose credentials will be displayed at the top of each knol.

"Google will not serve as an editor in any way, and will not bless any content," Manber emphasized. "All editorial responsibilities and control will rest with the authors. We hope that knols will include the opinions and points of view of the authors who will put their reputation on the line."

The common consensus in the media is that Google's knols are aimed squarely at Wikipedia, and in fact, the sample Web page on display in Manber's blog post does bear some passing resemblance to a typical Wikipedia page. At the top of the page is a brief summary, beside which is a table of contents with links to various sections of the page.

But Google is considering several different features, the most provocative of which is a ranking system that will affect how high the knols appear in Google search results. Manber said that Google anticipates that there will be competing knols for some topic, and rankings will help readers decide which knols are the most reliable and useful.

Google anticipates that some writers will choose to include Google Ads on their knol pages. "If an author chooses to include ads," Manber said, "Google will provide the author with substantial revenue share from the proceeds of those ads."

That feature alone suggests that Google's target is less Wikipedia than it is About.com, which has built an extensive network of topical ad-supported channels, each one with its own identified human guide. About.com hires writers to serve as Guides on specific titles and then pays them based on page views. The chief difference with Google's knol concept is that any person would be able to create a knol page on any conceivable topic.

Not surprisingly, at this early stage, there are myriad unanswered questions about how all of this will work. Manber also said that, although the concept centers around a specific author, "people will be able to submit comments, questions, edits, additional content, and so on."

Presumably, however, any suggested edits will have to be approved by the page's creator, or the concept of author origin and control will be lost.

It might be a while before the answers are known. A spokesperson for Google said in an e-mail interview that because this is still in the experimental stage, there are no "public-facing knols" for review right now. The company is not releasing any further information about when the knol feature will go live.

EBay Focusing On "User Experience"

EBay Inc. will focus on improving the "user experience" in 2008 in hopes of making the world's largest online auction more satisfying for its millions of users, a top executive said.

Engineers significantly updated eBay's home page earlier this year - for the first time since 1999 - and made its search engine faster.

Next year they'll focus on rooting out sellers with unethical or questionable business strategies - particularly vendors who charge exorbitant fees, said John Donahoe, president of eBay Marketplaces.

Many sellers lure shoppers with extremely low fixed prices or auctions that start at a penny - then charge disproportionate fees to mail the item to the buyer.

The phenomenon pervades lightweight electronics vendors, some of whom advertise cell phones or digital music players for virtually nothing - then charge \$15 or more to ship.

A year ago, Donahoe said, eBay began asking buyers to rank sellers' shipping costs on a scale of one to five. Users may now view that data in aggregate form and, if they want, decide whom to purchase from based on shipping fee scores.

The company may use the data in more palpable ways in 2008, such as incorporating shipping fee complaints into search algorithms; sellers with high shipping fees may not appear in the first page of search results. It also may include factors such as whether shipping was prompt or the seller responds to questions.

While they seem arcane, such tweaks have big ramifications for the tens of thousands of people who make their living through eBay. Donahoe, who came to eBay after a business consulting career, hopes buyers will be the beneficiaries.

"EBay needs to evolve the user experience to be more competitive and differentiated," Donahoe said in the company's San Jose, Calif., headquarters. "We could start basing our search results or other policies on user feedback, or at least give the buyer a warning."

A New Front Is Opened in the Browser Wars

Opera Software, the Oslo-based producer of the Opera browser, has filed a complaint with the European Commission against Microsoft, alleging that the software giant is unfairly abusing its dominant market position by tying Windows to Internet Explorer. The complaint also alleges that Microsoft is hindering Web interoperability by failing to adhere to widely accepted Web standards.

In a press statement released earlier Thursday, Opera CEO Jon von Tetzchner said that the company was acting on behalf of all consumers who are tired of having a monopolist make choices for them.

"In addition to promoting the free choice of individual consumers," Tetzchner added, "we are a champion of open Web standards and cross-platform innovation. We cannot rest until we've brought fair and equitable options to consumers worldwide."

The company is asking the European Commission to order Microsoft either to unbundle Internet Explorer or to require it to bundle additional competing browsers, such as Firefox or Opera. In addition, Opera is seeking an order requiring Microsoft to comply with "fundamental and open Web standards accepted by the Web-authoring community."

Earlier this year, the European Court of First Instance upheld a 2004 ruling by the European Commission that Microsoft abused its monopoly position by unfairly tying its Windows Media Player to its operating system. Opera's Chief Technology Officer, Hakon Wium Lie, said in a telephone interview that the Microsoft's behavior with its browser is parallel to its treatment of its music player.

"We think it's even more serious for browsers, though, because browsers are more important to people in their everyday lives," Lie said. "And with Web 2.0, the browser is increasingly turning into a platform for application development. If one company retains monopoly power, that's very harmful."

The crux of Opera's interoperability claim centers on Internet Explorer's failure to master the Acid2 test, a page-rendering challenge designed by the Web Standards Project to measure a browser's compliance with W3C HTML and CSS 2.0 standards. If a browser is fully compliant, a cheerful face appears on the screen under the words "Hello World," and the face's nose turns blue when the mouse hovers over it.

"It's a very visual example of how well different browsers comply with Web standards," Lie said.

Currently, just four browsers successfully render the image on the test page: Safari 2.0.3., Konqueror 3.5, Opera 9, and Mozilla Firefox 3.0b1. The page as rendered by Internet Explorer is a Mondrian-esque splash of reds, yellows, and blacks.

"This is a very difficult test," Lie said, "and it is difficult for all browsers, not just Microsoft. It took Opera almost a year to do it, but we've done it, Firefox has done it, Safari has done it, but Microsoft, they don't care, it seems."

Lie said he believes that by refusing to comply with commonly accepted Web standards, Microsoft is attempting to take its OS monopoly onto the Web. "It's very important to them," Lie said, "because the Web is the new platform. The browser is becoming the fundamental tool for computer users."

Norton AntiVirus 11 Ships for Leopard

Leopard has a new weapon in its antimalware arsenal with Symantec's release on Monday of Norton AntiVirus 11 for Mac OS X 10.5. Symantec said the new product offers improved performance and better protection against Internet-connected applications.

The new version of the popular security software features signature-based protection against malware that can be installed when the user downloads pictures, music, and software. Symantec said that 78 percent of attacks take place at this level.

Even though Macs are less of a target for malware, Symantec noted that the machines still can pass malicious software to others by e-mail, instant messages, or Web links. The other machines can be either PCs or Macs, so AntiVirus 11 scans for viruses and other vulnerabilities for both platforms.

AntiVirus 11 can gather updates in the background, so it can protect with what Symantec called "set it and forget" convenience. The software also has less impact on system startup and resource use, according to the company.

The newly updated interface features wizards to indicate system status, and a new Norton AntiVirus dashboard widget that shows a summary of current protection levels. For users who hate to be interrupted in the middle of a movie scene, scheduled virus scans can be moved to a less intrusive time with the "snooze button."

For power users, there is a command line interface via the Terminal, for

adding virus scans and custom scripts as desired. But some Mac users, power or not, invariably ask whether antivirus software is needed for their platform.

Apple itself promotes Macs as being less vulnerable to viruses than PCs. On its Web site, for instance, it said that while "no computer connected to the Internet will ever be 100 percent immune from attack, Mac OS X has helped the Mac keep its clean bill of health with a superior Unix foundation and security features that go above and beyond the norm of PCs."

In a column last month for the Washington Post, computer security expert Brian Krebs said he is often asked by Mac users whether they should use antivirus software. He wrote that "there are very few examples of malicious software in the wild built for Mac users," but said that every user should be aware of risks when using the Internet, such as in downloading software from sites whose credibility is unknown.

Other experts have noted that many Macs are used in multiplatform environments, and could spread viruses to PCs if the Macs themselves do not have adequate protection.

The new version of Norton AntiVirus for the Mac costs \$49.95 and includes one year of updates.

Spam Levels Rise to Unprecedented Heights

Spam continues to plague the average computer user, with up to 95 percent of all e-mail traffic consisting of unsolicited e-mails, according to a study from Web security vendor Barracuda Networks.

Barracuda analyzed more than one billion e-mail messages sent to its 50,000 customers, and found that 90 to 95 percent of all e-mail sent in 2007 was spam, up from 85 to 90 percent last year.

That number has been on the rise since 2001, when spam accounted for only 5 percent of e-mail traffic. In 2004, the year that Congress passed the CAN-SPAM Act, spam was 70 percent of all e-mail, Barracuda said.

In a separate poll of 261 business professionals, Barracuda also found that 57 percent of respondents viewed spam as the worst form of junk advertising, while 31 percent cited postal junk mail and 12 percent selected telemarketing.

Thirteen percent of those polled reported receiving more than 50 spam messages a day, while 65 percent received fewer than 10, the report said.

Barracuda saw an influx of spam messages on Thanksgiving Day, when spammers tried to cash in on the post holiday shopping frenzy by sending phishing e-mails from popular retailers. Spammers are expected to again blast consumers after New Year's with resolution-themed e-mails for things like weight loss and online college degrees, according to Barracuda.

The most common spam technique in 2007 was identity obfuscation, whereby spammers send e-mails from a variety of sources or register new domain names in order to get around spam traps, Barracuda said.

The use of attachments in spam is also on the rise, the report found.

Sentencing in Massive Phishing Bust

Two people have been sentenced for their participation in a massive phishing operation busted up by Italian authorities in July.

Sorin Pascu, 22, of Romania, was sentenced to five and a half years, and Marius Braditeanu, head of the scam, was sentenced to six years, according to Tuesday's edition of *il Giornale*.

Police arrested 18 Italians and eight other Eastern Europeans in July. The country's financial police, the *Guardia di Finanza*, said the scam involved sending fraudulent e-mails that appeared to come from *Poste Italiane*, the country's postal operator, which also offers bank accounts, insurance and loans.

The e-mails urged victims to hand over sensitive financial information. The scammers then withdrew money from their accounts, the finance authority said at the time.

Eventually, fraud management officials from *Poste Italiane* and the finance authority traced the transaction papers used to empty the accounts, which initially occurred in the Milan area and then spread throughout the country.

Pascu reportedly told authorities the gang bought 10 (US\$14.70) phone cards to connect to the Internet, which allowed them a greater degree of anonymity to send the phishing e-mails.

Police said at least 200 people were victimized by the scam, although they think the number of victims is much higher, *il Giornale* reported.

As Commodore 64 Turns 25, Founders Reminisce

The founding fathers of the personal computer met on Monday night to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Commodore 64. The event was markedly different than most Silicon Valley parties these days. Business cards weren't passed, no one text- or instant-messaged during the presentation, and no one said "Hey, Facebook me later."

Instead, the event was for the old boys who pioneered the personal computer, a testament to the old days when geeks were really geeks and eggheads. Speakers on the panel included Jack Tramiel, founder and chief executive officer of Commodore, Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, William Lowe, father of the IBM PC, and Adam Chowanec, developer of the Amiga PC and chairman of the board for Liquid Computing.

The culture and attitude in the early days of the PC was not as touchy-feely as it is today. Tramiel would most likely not have taken kindly to the idea of hiring his employees a chef or letting them bring their dogs to work. He discussed the "business is war" philosophy that he is known for, which is the antithesis of the Valley culture today. He

said that his cutthroat attitude is why he was able to succeed in selling over 22 million units of the Commodore 64.

"I think I produced more millionaires in that company than anybody else," Tramiel said. "My job was to tell them what they were doing wrong, not tell them how good they are."

"Well, what about a company like Google whose culture is the exact opposite of that?" asked John Markoff, a writer for The New York Times and moderator of the panel.

"Google is not making a product that is strictly innovation. They need to tell people how good they are," Tramiel replied.

Tramiel survived the Holocaust during World War II. After he immigrated to the United States, he said he felt the need to give back to the government that had helped save him. His way of giving back was to join the U.S. Army, where his job was repairing typewriters and writing machines. He took that skill with him after he left the army and his expertise in typewriters evolved into the Commodore 64. And why that moniker?

"Well I was in the army and I wanted to call my company 'General,' but there are so many Generals in the United States - General Electric, General Motors, etc." he said. "Then I went to 'Admiral' and that was taken. So I wound up in Berlin and we were in a cab and the cab made a short stop and in front of it was an Opel Commodore. And that was it."

Tramiel admitted that he was overly focused on hardware back then and underestimated the importance of software. He recalls his decision to use the Microsoft BASIC operating system rather than his own proprietary software.

"Bill Gates came to see me trying to sell BASIC," Tramiel said. "He told me I didn't have to give him any money, I only had to give him \$3 per unit. I told him I was already married," he joked. "I told him that the highest price I would give him was \$2,500. So he took that \$2,500 and after that he didn't want to speak to me."

Other panelists discussed the unknown and the uncertainty they felt in the early days when computing was seen as more of a hobby than a business tool.

"We tried to sell to Commodore and we got turned down," Wozniak said. "Steve [Jobs] offered the system for a couple hundred thousand dollars and I was shaking in my boots thinking, 'How can we be talking about this much work?' I was scared to death and it was Steve who had the guts back then."

Lowe reminisced about early visions of computing that seemed so far out in the 1970s.

"When I was trying to convince IBM that we should do a micro-based machine, I was introduced to Ted Nelson," Lowe said. "I brought him to a meeting at IBM and he made a presentation with an overhead projector. The presentation was pictures of him retrieving data from around the world, in the Amazon, on a beach. His message was that anyone would be able to get any information on any date, anywhere in the world, at any given time. And I'll tell you, that is natural today but back in 1978, that was revolutionary. And he said that was the way that we should

design our computing world. So we did."

The event was sold-out and panelists received a standing ovation before they cut the anniversary cake.

"We've suffered through almost a whole year of hype around the iPhone but it didn't even touch the kind of hype and enthusiasm we had for the Commodore 64 back then," Markoff said. "It was infectious and palpable."

One could argue that it still is.

What's This w00t and Why Is It Word of the Year?

Gamers, rejoice! The quintessential l33t-speak shout - "w00t!" - has been named the "Word of the Year" by the Merriam-Webster Online Web site. In the somewhat dry language of the company's press release, "w00t" is listed as an interjection, and defined as "expressing joy (it could be after a triumph, or for no reason at all); similar in use to the word 'yay.'"

According to the Merriam-Webster Web site, "w00t" is a transliteration derived an acronym for the phrase "We Owned the Other Team." The innovative spelling, with two zeros in the middle, is derived from a hackerlanguage known as "l33t," in which numbers and symbols are substituted for letters they resemble.

"What's interesting about the selection of w00t is that it is taking language in a new direction," said John Morse, President and Publisher of Merriam-Webster Inc., in the company's press release. "Given the inefficiency of texting with a numeric keyboard, people look for self-evident numeral-letter substitutions: 0 for O; 3 for E; 7 for T; and 4 for A. This is simply a different and more efficient way of representing the alphabetical character."

Another explanation, according to some gaming Web sites, is that hackers began developing l33t as a way of making it harder to search for their bulletin board conversations online. Undoubtedly, however, the NSA is hard at work on a real-time l33t translator.

Regardless of exactly how "l33t" and "w00t" developed, it is a safe bet that somewhere, Noah Webster is smiling. In 1828, after more than two decades of work, Webster published "An American Dictionary of the English Language," in which he himself revolutionized the spelling of many common words. Among other things, he dropped the "u" in words like "colour," changed "centre" to "center" and "gaol" to "jail," and added words that were uniquely American, such as chowder, hickory, squash, and skunk. Clearly, this was not a man who believed in a static vocabulary.

Despite the historical and linguistic significance of the dictionary, it sold poorly, and Webster finished his life in relative poverty. Following his death, the rights to the Dictionary were acquired by G & C Merriam in Springfield, Massachusetts. More than 160 years later, the company (still based in Springfield) continues to publish updated versions of Webster's groundbreaking work.

Merriam-Webster named "w00t" as the top word of 2007 after conducting a

poll on its m-w.com Web site, in which visitors were asked to choose from a list of twenty words compiled by the company. The words were selected from frequent searches on Merriam-Webster Online and submissions to Merriam-Webster's "Open Dictionary," which enables visitors to submit suggestions for new words. In taking top honors, "w00t" beat out two other well-known recent additions to the English language: "facebook" (which finished #2) and "blamestorm" (which finished #5).

As the winner of the 2007 vote, "w00t" joins a prestigious group of prior winners, including "truthiness" (2006), "integrity" (2005), and "blog" (2004). It will be interesting to see how this Borg of a word influences future votes; perhaps next year's winner will be declared the "M3rr14m-W3b\$73r W0r^? 0ï¿% ' 7h3 '¥34r."

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